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Fantasy: the Fidelity of the Mirrors

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Panel: Fantasy and Reality

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Fantasy: the Fidelity of the Mirrors

Giovanna Rivero

No one knows who is behind the page, who is reading us, watching us, spying on us, believing with a certain morbid fascination, like an innocent voyeur, that the story made of letters is our life. This could be considered praise if we apply the following formula: if what you write is true, then what you write is good, and you are a true writer.

However, the formula doesn't always work. Sometimes it becomes a cage and we become prisoners of our fantasy. I want to share an anecdote from my history with you, perhaps because the moment to carry out my own catharsis has arrived.

When I published my first novel, *The Chameleons*, I was "happily married," as a fairy tale would put it. Nonetheless, the monstrous silence of dissatisfaction with married life was creeping inside me, taking up every space in my soul. Before *The Chameleons*, I had published three books of stories; but this new erotic novel was what would construct or destroy a public image for me. Later, it was difficult to recognize my own responses during interviews. A kind of alienation, a phantasm had occupied my place. Mr. Hyde had just murdered Dr. Jekyll. My ex-husband was also unable to discern the limit between fantasy and reality. The novel is written in first person; it's the autobiography of a woman who becomes aware of her emotional experiences, of her sexuality, of her dissatisfactions and desires. My ex-husband believed incorrectly that she, the protagonist, was I. Obviously that was not the only point of conflict leading to our divorce, maybe it was only the tip of the iceberg. But, of course, that is not what's important in this paper. I only want to point out that the power of the word, in my case, became flesh, and the price was very high. The novel became a prophecy of what was to come in my own life.

Umberto Eco says that each sign, each metaphor, becomes an act to the extent that that fantasy, superimposed on reality, replaces it. Of course, I know that if I write a story about a murderer I have no reason to become a murderer. It is our fundamental dissatisfaction with immediate reality, with routine, and the things that are repeated mechanically, like a machine for living, that make us write and invent. For the time being, the only thing I know is that I have been given this life. At times it seems very long to me, it wearies me to live it, to overcome difficulties, to pay taxes, put on makeup; but at times I think that it is too short, that I'd like to experience every possibility, like an eternal hitchhike ride, never knowing where I'll end up. It's then that I create characters that don't exist, in order to somehow ride this roller coaster of experiences.

Is this perhaps an illusion? An epiphany? Some kind of schizophrenia? I don't know. The world is wide and alien, and so I appropriate that distant world through fantasy, sometimes as though I were going to attend a costume party. I stand in front of the mirror, then, to see how well the words fit my mask, my feathers and sequins. The image that the mirror reflects back isn't always the one I expect, and from that surprise arises the new and original metaphor to which Umberto Eco refers.

In Latin America, García Márquez and Alvaro Mutis, to cite a couple of famous names, have created non-existent cities, not as a game in the style of Italo Calvino, but as if that space and not others were the ones where people grow up, suffer, love, die and are revived. The generation of writers before mine has had to write under the shadow of those cities, of Macondos and Santa Marías, small, magic towns where anything can occur with complete naturalness, where dogs can howl in suffering for their loved ones, and people can bark from hunger. My generation has overcome the irresistible force of that style, perhaps because technology's special effects make a tradition of magical worlds filled with women who wait like so many eternal Penelopes seem ridiculous.

In our new rhetoric, images are fragmented into a hazardous and chaotic sequentiality that seduces us. This fantasy is like traveling in a bus, the window's frame shows us images that last a second: a girl who's too skinny, possibly anorexic, an old man who struggles against the wind to light his cigarette, a woman who discreetly adjusts her pantyhose. Maybe fantasy is an infinite comic strip into which we can insert a vignette blindly, in any part of the chapter. I think so. I also believe that fiction, fantasy and truth are a triangle, and fiction is the vehicle through which fantasy and truth blend, confuse and devour us.

It's not surprising that cinema has returned to the classic heroes. Spiderman has returned. Isaac Asimov offers us "I, Robot," and animated actors attempt to replace Hollywood. Fantasy gestates reality in its womb. This, of course, is not apocalyptic news, it's only a turn in a cycle. In a couple of decades we'll again feel nostalgic for romantic comedies and linear stories that don't obligate us to travel in the time machine until our nerves are on edge.

Why do we write? Are we fakers? Maybe big liars or a gentle impostors? Again, I don't have an answer. Anyway, since the dawn of time, the need to recreate reality reminds us that we need to challenge mortality in order to continue living with the only sure promise that we have: we are going to die. As writers, we leave behind a cast of characters who will outlive us. It is an act that says: "Hey, God, I want to be like you, I also want to create something that hasn't been invented." We want to find the word, the story, the plot inside ourselves that will have our mark. Only then can we write our own epitaph.

Fantasy saves us from mediocrity. Reality, of course, is not always mediocre. How mediocre is a man who has decided to kill his wife's lover? This happens everyday, we only have to open the police section of the newspapers. The reader believes in the "official words" covered by the verisimilitude of the journalism.

If it's believable, it's true, at least as long as the fascination of a reader behind the page lasts. Permanence in the realm of the imaginary depends up how good of writers we become. On that personal path, we are irrevocably alone, barely accompanied by our phantasms, demons, by our invisible cities and friends. In some marvelous way, that converts us again into children, and naively protects us from everything else.

Writing is a mysterious act of faith, so blind, so committed, so peaceful and, at the same time so arrogant, like believing in God.